

Sermon for Evensong on the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 21st August 2016 -

Isaiah 30:8-21, 2 Corinthians 9: Supermarket Stories (2) - God loves a cheerful giver.

My sermons today will have been tales of two supermarkets. This morning I was gently pointing out that perhaps Jesus' saying, that it was all right to heal sick people on the Sabbath, wasn't a total let-off from the Ten Commandments - and especially the one about observing the Sabbath day and keeping it holy. Although we all go to Waitrose after service on Sunday, is it the right thing to do, really?

Tonight I'm bringing to you my thoughts, about helping with the Foodbank collection at the big Sainsbury's in Cobham yesterday. It put me in mind of part of our lesson from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: 'God loves a cheerful giver'.

You can heave a sigh of relief, that I don't plan to give you a hard sell to increase your banker's order to St Mary's - although of course if someone new came along and wanted to know how the work of the church is sustained, then pretty early in the discussion I would expect the practicalities of a banker's order and Gift Aid declaration would come up.

No, I wanted to share with you a little about an expression I heard plenty of times yesterday. It was, 'I'm all right, thank you.' Yes, 'I'm all right, thank you.' That was probably the first thing I heard, when I offered someone a small shopping list with a list of those items we haven't got enough of in our warehouse in order to provide a nutritionally-balanced package of food for all our clients. 'Would you like a shopping list? You know, for the Foodbank - things to buy for us?' And they said, 'I'm all right, thank you.'

Under my breath I muttered, 'It's not whether you are all right that I'm concerned about. It's your Mum in a nursing home. The family who live next door to you. Are they all right?' But I sensed that what was being said wasn't actually what he really meant.

We were wanting people to take one of our 'shopping lists' and buy one or two of the items listed in it, in addition to their own shopping. They would then be able to drop off the food in our collection crates, and add to our food collection, making up the shortages in our warehouse and enabling clients to pick up good food to tide them over their thin time.

This person wasn't expressing a view about how he was, yesterday. He wasn't all right. But he said he was; because he was embarrassed, or shy. He wasn't, I'm afraid, a cheerful giver.

You encounter the same effect sometimes, when you collect for Christian Aid. Some people refuse to give, in a variety of ingenious ways. 'The dog must have eaten the envelope'. The best one I have heard is, 'We don't give to that kind of thing.' What kind of thing? What 'kind of thing' is Christian Aid - or Cobham Area Foodbank? They are both registered charities, after all. They have to follow prescribed, approved, charitable purposes.

How awful! you will say. What is the world coming to? People never used to be that mean. Well, actually, nothing much has changed - for over 2,000 years. Look at this fascinating passage from St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He's fund-raising for something. One of the difficulties with Paul's letters is that you rarely find out what a letter, which he's replying to, said. But it's clear that he's been in Macedonia, and got concrete support for a charitable venture of some kind from the Christian congregation there.

Members of a church were called 'saints', *sancti*, in Latin, ἀγίοι, holy ones, in Greek, by St Paul. It's the sanctity of being separate, being fenced off, from ordinary society. Perhaps we're 'saints' in that cut-off sense too. Look - there are about 20 of us meeting here for worship tonight. We're rather a tiny minority of the population as a whole. Saints.

But even so - and this is what I find fascinating here - mundane considerations of raising money to support the mission have to be dealt with. Paul has asked the Corinthians to raise some money for the relief of poverty in some of the other churches. He tells them how generous the Macedonians have been in giving to the same cause. He's sending on ahead of him two of his team, to ensure that there's no backsliding, so that the Corinthians' contribution is ready when they arrive. Quite mundane stuff. No high-faluting theology or philosophy here. Just make sure that your Parish Share is ready!

And again, Paul appeals to quite basic instincts in his readers. The more you put in, the more you'll get out. [2 Cor.9:6]. God can add to what you yourself give - and God can give you the necessary abundance so that you can afford to be generous. It's a sort of 'matched giving'. A big donor - if you are a Methodist, the Rank Trust - will add a pound for every pound that you yourselves raise. God is the ultimate matched giver. Pretty down-to-earth stuff.

Being a generous donor to charity is a good thing. People will speak well of you. 'As it is written, He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth for ever.' 'Dispersing abroad' isn't offshore investment, by the way. It's just a way of spreading generosity around. 'As it is written', says Paul. It's a quotation from Psalm 112. Being a generous giver, says Paul, isn't just a way of helping other Christians. It is in itself a way of praising God.

But Paul is also keen to point out that giving to charity is not compulsory. 'Each person should give as he has decided for himself; there should be no ... sense of compulsion' (2 Cor 9:7). But if you are willing, but perhaps worried whether you have enough to give some away, St Paul reassures you. 'He who provides seed for sowing and bread for food will provide the seed for you to sow; he will multiply it and swell the harvest of your benevolence, and you will always be rich enough to be generous.' (vv 9-10).

But it isn't easy. It isn't easy to fund-raise for church or for charity. There will always be these people who tell you they're 'all right', and pass on by. They're not all right.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant